

Inspiration of that Soulful Sound

Text and photographs by CHRISTOPHER HOLLAND

One taste of a particular South Asian strain of Sufi music led Fulbright scholar Christopher Holland halfway across the world, searching for more. His journey ended in a New Delhi alley on a sweltering night, when he heard the *qawwals* singing.

I can remember many years ago my friends telling me about a phenomenal Sufi singer from Pakistan who, so they said, would knock me off my feet. They knew that I was deeply involved in music and was always looking for something new to broaden my horizons. So I took their advice, wrote his name down (because I had difficulty pronouncing the long name) and purchased my first Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

album. Listening, I became enthralled, feeling suspended in reality like a child is with a new toy, and played the entire album many times.

The words I did not understand and the musical style was completely different than what I was accustomed to hearing, but the soul of the singing was deep and resonated in me. Being a native of Georgia, in the southern United States, I could not help being reminded of the soulful Gospel music I was used to hearing in churches.

The Nusrat album opened a vibrant new world of Sufi-inspired music to me, and although many years have passed, I look back on this moment and it always brings a smile to my face. I learned that Nusrat's sound was based on a Sufi style of singing that is found only in South Asia, called *qawwali*. Inspired, I tried to find more soulful music like Nusrat's in

the States. This search was long, difficult and fruitless. I knew that a trip to South Asia was imminent.

I arrived in New Delhi one year ago. Quickly, I found that Sufi is the new catch phrase for all forms of art, including music. Every time I looked in the newspaper a new album was being released that claimed to be Sufi, or a new show of Sufi dance and music was being produced.

All of these interested me because I wanted to take in as much of the Sufi art as possible while in India on my search for the inspiration behind Nusrat's soulful sound. I listened to the new Sufi albums coming from people like Zila Khan, Abida Parveen, Strings and Pankaj Awasthi. And I attended many Sufi performances, by Madan Gopal, the Wadali Brothers, Humasar Hayat, and the annual festival, Jahan-e-Khusrau.

Each of these albums and performances possessed its own Sufi-inspired flair and was enjoyable, but did not seem to fully quench my thirst for the inspiration behind the Nusrat style. Finally, on one



These qawwals traveled to Fatehpur Sikri in Uttar Pradesh to take part in a mehfil-e-sama' (gathering), as the sun began to spread its rays in the sky.



sweltering Thursday night, I ventured through the winding alleys to the *dargah* of Nizamuddin Auliya.

And I heard the *qawwals* singing.

Immediately, I forgot about the uncomfortable heat and felt relaxed as though I were sitting in my home back in the States, remembering that first time I heard Nusrat. They played and sang for what seemed like hours, stopping only for *namaz* (prayer). With the energy and vibrant life in which the *qawwals* sang in praise of God, I was again reminded of that soulful joy of Southern Gospel that I was used to.

Having a working knowledge of Urdu, I quickly became friends with many of the *qawwals*, talking with them whenever I went to the *dargah*. We would discuss all things *qawwali* and I began to learn about this musical tradition that has managed to survive for more than 700 years, through many periods of political threat and social change.

Qawwali began when the founder of the Chishti order of Sufism, Muinuddin Chishti, came from Baghdad to Ajmer,

Above: A muezzin sings a devotional remembrance at the dargah of Sheikh Nasiruddin in Chiragh village, New Delhi.

Right: Christopher Holland exhibited his photographs at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi in February.



Rajasthan, in the 13th century. Following Sufism's inclusive tradition of religious non-discrimination, he synthesized the Hindu style of *kirtan* with Arabic and Persian poetry to sing about the unity of God for *sama'* (listening). A century later, the artistic genius Amir Khusrau, who is also popularly recognized as the creator of the tabla and the sitar, organized what Muinuddin began, and *qawwali* was born.

One of the most popular stories the

qawwals like to tell is of the *Qawwal Bachche*. Meraj Ahmed Nizami, the elder *qawwal* of Nizamuddin's *dargah* relates: "Hazrat Amir Khusrau wanted to do something special for his sheikh, Nizamuddin, who was especially fond of *sama'*. So he found 12 especially talented young boys and trained them to perform the ragas he composed. The sheikh was very pleased with their performance and these 12 boys became known as the



The head priest at Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah in New Delhi accepts a donation during a qawwali gathering.

Qawwal Bachche."

The *qawwals* in Nizamuddin's *dargah* refer to themselves as *Qawwal Bachche* because they trace their lineage back to one of those 12 children. *Qawwali* has been passed from father to son through the generations, with an emphasis on the children remembering the poetry and correct pronunciation of the words because many of the *ganas* (songs) are in Persian. The style has been allowed to adapt to the changing times in order to make the music appealing to each new generation. Changes include incorporating new rhythms and instruments, such as the harmonium, introduced in the early 19th century and now synonymous with the *qawwali* sound.

From the 12th to 18th centuries in the Delhi region, depending on each new ruler's religious policy, *sama'* and *qawwali* were either discouraged or patronized. The Chishti Sufis, in their defense, have always referred to the 14th-century revered saint Nizamuddin, who successfully defended *sama'* throughout his life. A popular couplet the sheikh recited is:

"Sama' is forbidden in my opinion,"
you say.
Fine then, to you forbidden,
let it stay.

Although Sufi-inspired music and the *qawwali* style are increasingly popular, many people are unaware of the influence *qawwali* has had on culture in India. Since the inception of Bollywood, the movie industry has drawn heavily upon it. *Qawwals* were hired from Pakistan to train Bollywood

musicians. These musicians have adopted many of the melodies, though the words were changed. The Sufi poetry sung by the *qawwals*, with its beautiful imagery of love, also made its way into movie songs. After learning this, I started to pay more attention to Bollywood songs and found that I did hear such Sufi references as *ishq* (romance), *mehboob* (beloved), as well as some of the same melodies.

During my time spent with the *qawwals*, I was not only able to learn about the soulful tradition behind the Nusrat album that first inspired me, but I also learned some of the ragas and *ganas*. □

Christopher Holland, from Athens, Georgia, has been in India on a Fulbright scholarship since August 2005.